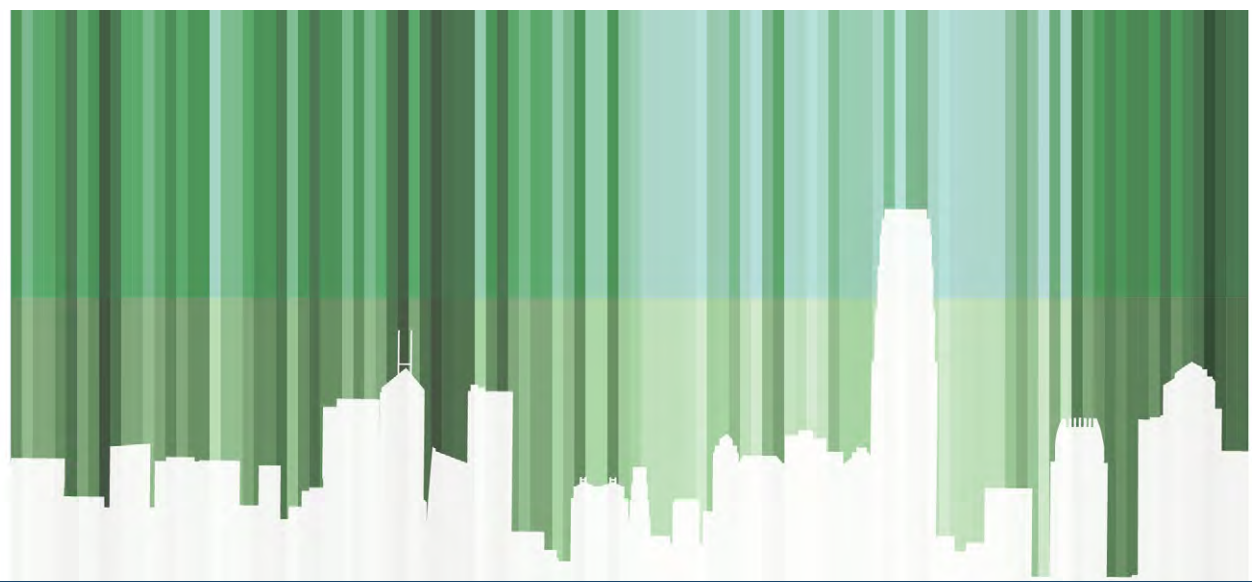
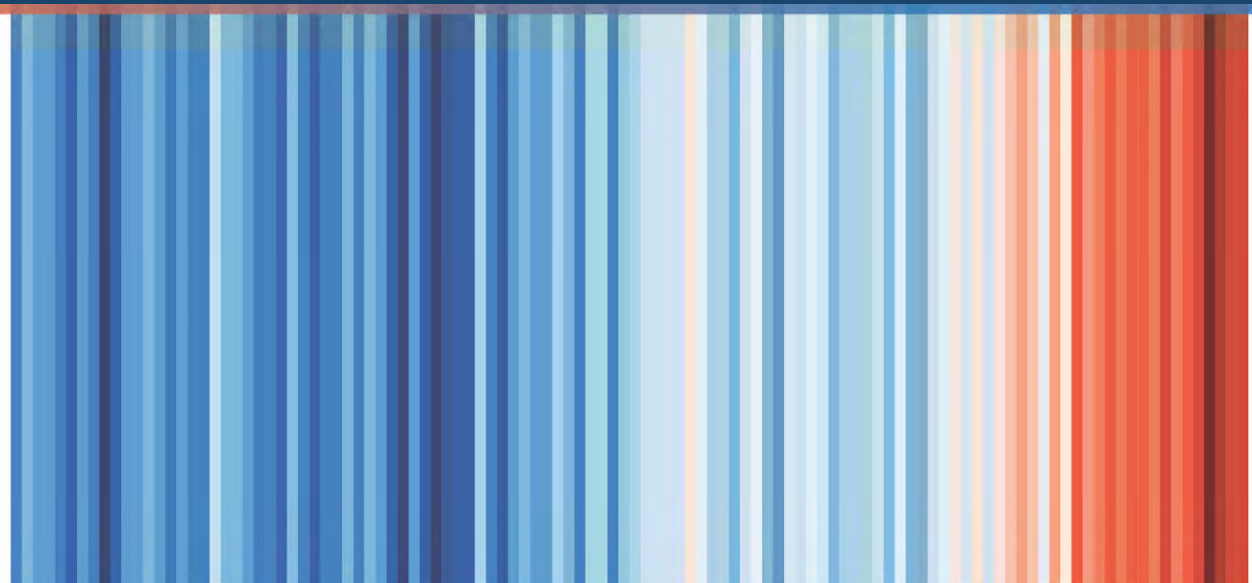




Ecological Civilization: National Strategy, Sustainable Development, and Hong Kong's First Five-Year Plan

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I. Ecological Civilization and Relevance for Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) is entering a new planning moment. For the first time, Hong Kong is preparing its own Five-Year Plan. This is more than an administrative exercise. It is an opportunity to consider how the HKSAR's future development should align with the country's long-term modernization pathway, while making full use of Hong Kong's distinctive strengths as an international financial centre, trade, shipping, aviation and logistics hub, common law jurisdiction, professional services platform, innovation centre, and "super connector" between China and the world.

In this context, the concept of Ecological Civilization (生態文明) deserves attention. The term is sometimes treated locally as unfamiliar Chinese Mainland policy language, or as a broad environmental slogan. That reading is too narrow. Ecological Civilization is now a central concept in national development strategy. It certainly includes pollution control, nature conservation and climate action, but its scope is much wider. It is a framework for rethinking development: how economic growth, resource use, industrial transformation, urbanization, finance, technology, social well-being, and the relationship between people and nature should be organized for the twenty-first century.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has described Ecological Civilization as a "coherent conceptual framework" used by the People's Republic of China to adjust development to meet twenty-first-century challenges.¹ The ADB explains that the concept differs from sustainable development by placing stronger emphasis on political and cultural factors, and on defining a new relationship between people and nature that allows people to live well within ecological limits. This distinction matters for Hong Kong because it already has many sustainability policies but still needs a stronger integrating framework.

Relationship with sustainable development

Hong Kong has long used the term 'sustainable development' (可持續發展). This remains important. It is familiar to government, business, civil society, international organizations, and the financial sector. It connects Hong Kong to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, ESG disclosure, green finance, corporate sustainability, climate risk management, and global policy debates. The term does not need to be abandoned. One of Hong Kong's strengths is its ability to translate between policy languages: national, regional, international, financial, legal, and professional.

Sustainable development has often been applied in Hong Kong in fragmented ways. Climate policy, biodiversity protection, waste management, green finance, building energy efficiency, transport decarbonization, air quality, marine protection, and resilience are still commonly handled through separate policy channels, each with its own plans, targets, stakeholders, and technical language. This fragmentation is understandable, but it creates a governance problem: Hong Kong risks accumulating many green initiatives without a coherent development narrative. It has also reinforced a narrow perception of environmental protection as a compliance cost, rather than as an investment in resilience, competitiveness, public health, innovation, and long-term prosperity.

Ecological Civilization has a broader lens

Ecological Civilization addresses this gap by supplying a broader strategic lens. It asks larger questions. What kind of development should Hong Kong pursue? How should ecological limits shape economic planning? How can finance and markets support nature, climate resilience, and low carbon transition? How should government coordinate across bureaux, departments, regulators and business and community sectors? How can Hong Kong contribute to national development while maintaining its 'high degree of autonomy' and

international openness? How can the city's first Five-Year Plan become more than a list of initiatives?

These questions matter because Ecological Civilization is closely linked to China's transition toward "high-quality development" (高質量發展). Over the past three decades, China's environmental governance has moved from pollution control and resource efficiency toward a more comprehensive development framework. Ecological Civilization has been incorporated into national policy, planning, institutional reform, legal development, green finance, spatial planning, biodiversity protection, climate action, and international cooperation. It has shaped China's Five-Year Plans from the 12th Five-Year Plan onward.

Hong Kong's first five-year plan

Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan, being developed in 2026, should therefore be understood as part of the wider national planning system rather than as a standalone local exercise. The HKSAR Government announced that Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan would align with the National 15th Five-Year Plan, serving as a "collective action framework" that will set out Hong Kong's development vision, core objectives, key areas and major initiatives over the next five years. Hong Kong's plan is intended to provide clear guidance for the HKSAR's socio-economic and livelihood development, and to support the city's deeper integration into, and contribution to, overall national development.²

If Ecological Civilization is part of China's national development pathway, Hong Kong needs to use and understand the term in this planning context. The task, however, is not to reproduce Mainland policy vocabulary mechanically. It is to explain Ecological Civilization in language that is meaningful in Hong Kong and internationally, and to translate the concept into actions suited to Hong Kong's institutions, economy, society, and international role.

Regional integration provides the immediate context for translating Ecological Civilization into action. The HKSAR Government has noted that the National 15th Five-Year Plan includes provisions to deepen the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), and that Hong Kong's own Five-Year Plan should support the city's deeper integration into, and contribution to, overall national development.³ Furthermore, in April 2026, the Financial Secretary stated that the National 15th Five-Year Plan explicitly supports Hong Kong in better integrating into and serving the country's overall development. He identified co-ordinated regional development as one of the Plan's key directions.⁴

The HKSAR Government has also begun to connect this planning agenda with Ecological Civilization. In a January 2026 Legislative Council reply on alignment with the country's development plans, the HKSAR Government stated that the National 15th Five-Year Plan covers priority areas including regional development and green development. It further noted that Hong Kong should "deeply engage" in the development of the GBA and, "in terms of green development," should promote green finance and carbon neutrality practices "to support the country's ecological civilisation construction."⁵ This is an important official recognition that Hong Kong's green development agenda can be framed as part of the national Ecological Civilization pathway.

This regional framing matters because Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao share air, water, coastal, marine, ecological, economic and infrastructure systems, and pollution and degradation do not stop at administrative boundaries. At the same time, each part of the GBA brings different strengths: Guangdong has manufacturing capacity, industrial transformation needs, renewable energy supply chains and large-scale ecological restoration opportunities; Macao has tourism and cultural exchange potential; and Hong Kong has finance, law, standards, disclosure, professional services, international connectivity, universities and civil society.

For Hong Kong, this means regional cooperation should not be treated as a separate policy theme, but as part of how Ecological Civilization becomes practical. Ecological protection should be built into regional planning, industrial layout, public investment and ecological security from the outset. This implies a shift from passive pollution control to forward-looking regional design: ecological corridors, coastal wetlands, blue-green infrastructure, integrated land-sea management, and restoration projects planned across administrative boundaries rather than within separate jurisdictions.

Ecological Civilization should be used as a strategic lens for the Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan: not to replace sustainable development, but to connect climate, biodiversity, finance, infrastructure, innovation and regional cooperation into a more coherent development pathway. The concept can help Hong Kong align with national strategy while strengthening its role as an international platform for green development. In practical terms, this means moving from sectoral initiatives to mission-oriented governance: defining clear outcomes, aligning public and private actors, and creating the institutional, financial and market conditions for implementation.

This paper therefore asks three questions. First, where did Ecological Civilization come from, and why has it become important in China's policy system? Second, how does it relate to sustainable development, the more familiar term used internationally and in Hong Kong? Third, how can Hong Kong make the concept meaningful through its first Five-Year Plan?

II. The Origins and Policy Evolution of Ecological Civilization

Ecological Civilization did not emerge suddenly. It is the product of several overlapping streams of thought and policy experience: China's cultural traditions concerning the relationship between humanity and nature; global debates about sustainable development; China's reflection on the environmental costs of rapid industrialization; and the evolution of national governance since the 1980s. Its significance lies in the way it has become embedded in China's understanding of modernization.⁶

The concept begins from a recognition that the industrial model of development generates wealth, but also severe environmental consequences. China experienced this tension acutely. Rapid growth lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and transformed the country's productive capacity, but it also brought resource constraints, air and water pollution, ecosystem degradation, land contamination, and rising greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs). These were development problems, not marginal environmental issues.

China's strategic response to rapid industrialization

Ecological Civilization represents a strategic response to the limitations of the 'pollute first, clean up later' model. Earlier phases of industrialization often treated environmental damage as a cost to be managed after economic growth had been achieved. China's own experience showed that this pathway was untenable. With a large population, limited per capita resources, extensive ecological pressures, and growing public expectations for environmental quality, environmental protection had to be built into the meaning of development itself.

This is where Ecological Civilization differs from narrower concepts of environmental protection. It goes beyond pollution control and conservation. It asks how development should be reorganized so that human prosperity, economic modernization, resource security, ecological integrity, and quality of life can be pursued together. Ecological Civilization is both a philosophy and a practical compass for a green and prosperous future, linking ecological factors with other elements of development in an unprecedented way. Its ambition is to move ecology from the margin of policy into the core of national development.

The intellectual roots of Ecological Civilization are wider than contemporary environmental management. Chinese traditions have long contained ideas about harmony between humanity and nature. Confucian thought emphasizes the unity of heaven and humanity; Daoist thought stresses following the ways of nature; and Buddhist traditions contain ideas of interdependence among living beings. These traditions do not provide a modern policy programme by themselves, but they help explain why Ecological Civilization is framed in China as a question of values, culture, and civilization.

The concept also draws from socialist thinking about production, society, and nature; global sustainable development debates; China's participation in international environmental agreements; and decades of practical governance experience. It is therefore a hybrid concept: culturally Chinese, politically embedded in the Party-state system, responsive to global sustainability debates, and increasingly operationalized through laws, plans, institutions, standards, finance, and market mechanisms.

National evolution of Ecological Civilization

The policy evolution was gradual. China placed environmental protection on the national governance agenda in the 1970s, and in 1983 environmental protection was established as a basic national policy. In the 1990s, sustainable development became part of China's national strategy. The *Scientific Outlook on Development* (科學發展觀) in the early 2000s emphasized people-oriented, comprehensive, coordinated, and sustainable development.⁷

This concept provided an important conceptual bridge between China's earlier sustainable development strategy and Ecological Civilization.

Ecological Civilization was formally incorporated into the report of the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007, marking its emergence as an important party governance concept. The 18th National Congress in 2012 elevated it further by integrating Ecological Civilization construction into the *Five-Sphere Integrated Plan* (五位一體總體佈局), alongside economic, political, cultural, and social development.⁸

This elevation was significant. Ecology was no longer a sectoral concern of environmental authorities. It became part of the overall architecture of national development. The “five-sphere” approach gave Ecological Civilization a place within China's modernization framework, while subsequent reforms turned the concept into governance practice. In 2015, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued major policy documents on Ecological Civilization, including the *Opinions on Further Promoting the Development of Ecological Civilization* and the *Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Progress*.⁹ Together, these documents marked an important step in turning Ecological Civilization from a broad development concept into a more systematic reform agenda.

The 2018 constitutional amendment further confirmed the concept's significance by writing Ecological Civilization into the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹⁰ The same year, China created the Ministry of Ecology and Environment as part of the State Council institutional reform, consolidating environmental and ecological functions that had previously been spread across several agencies.¹¹ This reflected a shift from fragmented pollution control toward a more integrated ecological and environmental governance approach, bringing climate, pollution control, ecosystem protection, marine protection, and environmental supervision into a more unified institutional framework.

Ecological Civilization has also become closely linked to China's long-term modernization goals. China's national vision looks toward 2035 and mid-century modernization. Within this framework, Ecological Civilization is part of building a modern socialist country. The 20th Party Congress in 2022 emphasized that Chinese modernization includes harmony between humanity and nature.¹² Modernization is therefore defined not only by income, infrastructure, industrial capacity, technology, or urbanization, but also by whether development safeguards ecological systems and improves quality of life.

Xi Jinping's role is central to this evolution. His green development thinking has roots in local governance, especially in Zhejiang, where he advanced the idea that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets” (綠水青山就是金山銀山). The phrase is associated with his 2005 visit to Anji County, Zhejiang Province, when he argued that ecological assets and economic assets should not be treated as opposites. It later became known as the “Two Mountains” (兩山理論) theory.

This idea reverses the assumption that environmental protection is a constraint on development. It argues that a good ecological environment can itself be a source of wealth (金山銀山), competitiveness, public well-being, and long-term prosperity. In policy terms, it links rural revitalization, ecological restoration, tourism, public health, green industry, natural capital, and local livelihoods. For Hong Kong, this thinking opens a different way of thinking about nature: not as undeveloped land waiting for use, or as a conservation luxury, but as an asset with ecological, social, cultural, health, climate, and economic value.

Under Xi Jinping, Ecological Civilization became more systematic as a national doctrine. It has been linked to high-quality development, the “Beautiful China” (美麗中國) vision, the fight against pollution, carbon peaking and carbon neutrality, biodiversity conservation, national parks, ecological redlines, green finance, and international cooperation.¹³

Today, Ecological Civilization has moved beyond being one policy concept among many. It is now part of the ideological and strategic architecture of China’s national development. For Hong Kong, this is important. Ecological Civilization is one of the ways China frames modernization, governance, development quality, national rejuvenation, and international contribution.

Box 1

Xi Jinping’s Green Development Thinking: From Local Practice to National Doctrine

Xi Jinping’s contribution to Ecological Civilization lies in turning the relationship between ecological protection and economic development into a central principle of national development.

Key milestones include:

- **2005:** Xi Jinping, then Party Secretary of Zhejiang Province, advanced the idea that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets,” later known as the “Two Mountains” theory.
- **2012:** After the 18th Party Congress, Ecological Civilization was elevated within China’s overall national development framework.
- **2015:** Central guidance documents helped turn Ecological Civilization into a more systematic reform agenda, including spatial planning, ecological redlines, environmental governance, and green development.
- **2018:** Ecological Civilization was written into the PRC Constitution, and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment was established.
- **2020:** China announced its dual carbon goals: carbon dioxide emissions peaking before 2030 and carbon neutrality before 2060.
- **2022:** The 20th Party Congress linked Chinese modernization with harmony between humanity and nature.
- **2025:** Selected Works of Xi Jinping on Ecological Civilization, Volume I, was published.

The significance of this record is that green development has become part of China’s modernization narrative. It is treated as a development philosophy, governance system, and long-term planning priority. The implication is that Hong Kong’s first Five-Year Plan should translate national direction into missions that fit the HKSAR’s own strengths under “one country, two systems.”

Box 2

The National 15th Five-Year Plan and Hong Kong's First Five-Year Plan

China's 15th Five-Year Plan marks an important stage in the country's path toward modernization by 2035. Like previous national plans, it is not only an economic forecast but a governing document: it sets priorities, signals direction, allocates attention, and shapes how government, markets, and society should work together.

The 15th Five-Year Plan emphasizes high-quality development, technological self-reliance, a modern industrial system, stronger domestic demand, national security, people's well-being, and green transformation. These themes are meant to reinforce one another.

For Hong Kong, the significance is direct. The HKSAR Government has stated that Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan, aligned with the National 15th Five-Year Plan, will serve as the city's "collective action framework," setting out Hong Kong's development vision, core objectives, key areas, and major initiatives over the next five years. It is intended to provide clear guidance for socio-economic and livelihood development and to drive Hong Kong's deeper integration into, and contribution to, overall national development.

The green dimension is especially important. The National 15th Five-Year Plan places green and low-carbon development within the broader task of Chinese modernization. In official HKSAR language, Hong Kong should "deeply engage" in GBA development and, in terms of green development, promote green finance and carbon neutrality practices "to support the country's ecological civilisation construction." This gives Hong Kong an official policy basis for treating its green development agenda as part of the national Ecological Civilization pathway.

If Ecological Civilization is embedded in China's national planning, modernization, finance, industrial, ecological, and international policy frameworks, Hong Kong's own Five-Year Plan cannot treat it as peripheral. The city needs to understand the concept to align with national priorities and identify where it can add value.

Ecological Civilization and Hong Kong

Hong Kong should not import Mainland policy language without adaptation. It has its own legal system, governance traditions, economic structure, civil society, market institutions, and international role. Its contribution will be strongest where it translates Ecological Civilization into mechanisms that fit Hong Kong's strengths: green and transition finance, common law contracting, disclosure and verification, professional services, sustainable infrastructure, green shipping and aviation, biodiversity and nature-based solutions, carbon markets, university research, and international engagement.

The origin and evolution of Ecological Civilization therefore matter for Hong Kong in three ways.

- They show that the concept is not a temporary slogan. It is now a major organizing idea in China's national development pathway. Any serious discussion of Hong Kong's future development must understand this context.
- They show that Ecological Civilization is broader than sustainable development as commonly practiced. It incorporates sustainability concerns, but adds stronger emphasis on political leadership, cultural values, planning, institutional reform, ecological limits, and the transformation of development models.
- They show that implementation is the real test. Ecological Civilization is ambitious, but its success depends on whether it can be translated into governance capacity, finance, market creation, legal frameworks, public participation, credible data, and measurable outcomes. This is precisely where Hong Kong can make a distinctive contribution.

Hong Kong should recognize and use the term Ecological Civilization. The question is how Hong Kong can make the term meaningful in practice. This means presenting Ecological Civilization in language that resonates locally and internationally, while translating the concept into governance capacity, finance, market creation, legal frameworks, public participation, credible data, and measurable outcomes.

III. Hong Kong's Role: Translating Ecological Civilization into Practical Missions

Ecological Civilization is a national development concept. Hong Kong's contribution depends on how the city translates it into practical missions suited to its own institutions, economy and international role. Under "one country, two systems," Hong Kong's strengths lie in finance, law, standards, disclosure, professional services, universities, civil society, international connectivity, and the ability to work across different policy languages.

To make Ecological Civilization practical, Hong Kong should adopt a mission-oriented approach. This means moving beyond separate initiatives and organizing policy, finance, regulation, public assets and private-sector participation around shared outcomes. An earlier HKUST paper prepared for the Chief Executive's Policy Unit (CEPU) in April 2026 describes mission-oriented green development as *integrative, directional, system-wide and market-shaping*: it aligns energy, industry, infrastructure, finance, ecology, technology and talent under a common direction, and uses policy to create the conditions for investment, innovation and implementation.¹⁴

This is why Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan matters. It can identify where the city's distinctive strengths can contribute to national green development and the wider international sustainability agenda. The term "Ecological Civilization" should be used, and the concept should organize Hong Kong's green development priorities so that climate, biodiversity, finance, infrastructure, shipping, aviation, trade, talent, innovation, and regional cooperation are treated as connected parts of a development strategy.

Hong Kong already has many of the building blocks. The HKSAR Government's *Climate Action Plan 2050* (which is expected to be revised) sets out the vision of a zero-carbon liveable city and sustainable development and identifies four major decarbonization strategies: net-zero electricity generation, energy saving and green buildings, green transport, and waste reduction. These strategies are important, but they are still often treated as environmental or sectoral policies. Ecological Civilization invites a broader question: how can these strategies be connected to Hong Kong's economic positioning, public health, urban resilience, finance, innovation, regional integration, and long-term competitiveness?

The answer should be mission oriented. Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan should identify several green development missions where the city can make a distinctive contribution. These missions should be ambitious enough to require cross-bureau and cross-department coordination, public-private collaboration and regulatory alignment, but concrete enough to become projects, standards, financing structures, data systems and public engagement programmes. They should align with national priorities while remaining credible to international markets and partners.

Missions provide the bridge between policy direction and market action. They translate high-level goals such as decarbonization, resilience, biodiversity protection and green development into programmes that can be implemented, financed, monitored and communicated.

Mission 1: Build Hong Kong as a platform for green, transition, adaptation and nature finance

Hong Kong is already a major centre for green and sustainable finance. Ecological Civilization requires finance to move beyond labels and disclosure toward market creation. The key question is whether finance can create investable pipelines for building retrofits,

energy efficiency, climate adaptation, green shipping and aviation, circular economy infrastructure, biodiversity restoration, and nature-based solutions (NbS).

The Hong Kong Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance Phase 2A, published by the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) in January 2026, expanded the taxonomy to six sectors, increased economic activities from 12 to 25, introduced transition elements, and added climate change adaptation as a new environmental objective.¹⁵ This is the kind of market infrastructure that can translate Ecological Civilization into financial practice. The next step is to connect taxonomy, disclosure, project pipelines, financing products, and measurable outcomes.

Mission 2: Retrofit and transform Hong Kong's built environment for carbon neutrality, resilience and liveability

Hong Kong's built environment is central to its carbon challenge and quality of life. Buildings, infrastructure, transport, energy systems, drainage, cooling, public space, and urban nature are connected. Ecological Civilization provides a way to treat decarbonization, resilience, public health, and urban liveability as one agenda.

This mission could include accelerating building retrofits, improving energy efficiency, reducing heat risk, expanding NbS, strengthening drainage and coastal resilience, and using public sector assets to create scalable demonstration projects. The aim is to show how a dense, high income, subtropical city can modernize within ecological limits.

Mission 3: Advance nature-positive development through biodiversity, nature-based solutions and long-term stewardship

Hong Kong has substantial ecological assets despite its density: country parks, wetlands, marine ecosystems, coastal habitats, urban biodiversity, and a rich interface between built and natural environments. Yet, nature is still too often treated either as conservation land or as a constraint on development.

Ecological Civilization encourages a more strategic approach. Nature should be understood as infrastructure, climate resilience, public health, education, cultural value, and long-term economic value. This is especially relevant to the Northern Metropolis, Deep Bay, coastal wetlands, blue carbon opportunities, and the wider GBA ecological network.

Mission 4: Position Hong Kong as a green aviation, maritime, port and logistics hub

Hong Kong's role as an international shipping, aviation, trade, and logistics hub gives it a direct stake in the decarbonization of global supply chains. For Hong Kong, this means connecting green fuels, port electrification, green corridors, sustainable aviation fuels, emissions data, trade finance, insurance, standards, and professional services.

This mission would align Hong Kong's traditional strengths with the future of low carbon trade. It would also connect local air quality, regional port cooperation, global shipping standards, aviation transition, and Hong Kong's broader role as a trade and finance platform.

Mission 5: Build green professional services, trusted standards and transition talent

Hong Kong's international role depends on trust. In the green transition, trust is built through credible data, transparent disclosure, independent verification, legal enforceability, professional competence, and alignment with international standards. This is one of Hong Kong's clearest contributions to Ecological Civilization.

Hong Kong can help translate national green development objectives into financial and professional systems that international investors, companies, regulators, and development partners can understand and use. This requires training talent across finance, law,

engineering, accounting, certification, insurance, planning, architecture, ecology, and communications.

Mission 6: Use the GBA as a demonstration space for ecological civilization

The GBA is the natural testing ground for Hong Kong's role. Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao share ecological systems and environmental risks, but they also have complementary capabilities. Guangdong has industrial scale, manufacturing capability, renewable energy supply chains, and major ecological restoration opportunities. Hong Kong has finance, law, professional services, disclosure, standards, universities, and international capital markets. Macao has tourism, culture, public engagement, and links to Portuguese-speaking countries.

Ecological Civilization can provide the common framework, while each jurisdiction contributes through its strengths. Hong Kong's role is to turn cross-boundary ecological goals into financeable, governable, measurable, and communicable projects.

This translation role is increasingly important internationally. Recent scholarship argues that China's global Ecological Civilization narrative faces three gaps: a conceptual gap between Ecological Civilization and established international governance frameworks; a practical gap between China's practices and how they are understood internationally; and a communication gap between China's achievements and the way those achievements are communicated abroad.¹⁶ Hong Kong is well placed to help bridge these gaps. It understands the national policy context and works in the international language of sustainable development, ESG, green finance, disclosure, common law, standards, and professional services.

This is where Hong Kong's "super connector" role becomes practical. The city can connect Ecological Civilization with global sustainable development by translating concepts into instruments. It can turn ecological restoration into investable projects; climate adaptation into taxonomy-recognized activities; building retrofits into bankable portfolios; biodiversity into measurable natural capital outcomes; green shipping into financeable infrastructure and fuel pathways; and GBA ecological cooperation into cross-boundary project pipelines.

The practical implication is that Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan should make Ecological Civilization operational through missions. These missions would give the concept concrete meaning in Hong Kong and allow the city to connect its own development needs with national strategy and international expectations. The point is not to present Hong Kong as having all the answers. The point is to make a disciplined start.

IV. Recommendations for Hong Kong's First Five-Year Plan

The test of Ecological Civilization in Hong Kong will be implementation. The city already has policies across many relevant areas; the gap is integration. The HKUST 5-Pillar Model of Climate Governance, developed as part of HKUST's parallel Climate Governance Project, provides a practical framework for addressing this challenge: direction, leadership, integration, finance and market creation, and transparency and engagement.¹⁷ Among these, integration is especially important because it requires bureaux and department heads to align policy, planning, infrastructure, regulation and implementation around shared outcomes. Mainstreaming is one of the principal tools for achieving that integration.

Together, these conditions can turn Ecological Civilization from a national concept into a practical development agenda for Hong Kong. The city's first Five-Year Plan should therefore focus less on listing initiatives and more on creating the governance conditions that allow green development to scale.

1. Set clear direction through clear missions

The first Five-Year Plan should define how Hong Kong intends to contribute to the country's green and high-quality development pathway. Ecological Civilization can serve as the organizing principle, but it should be expressed in terms that are meaningful locally and internationally: climate resilience, green finance, biodiversity/NbS, low carbon urban development, circular economy, sustainable infrastructure, trusted standards, and public health.

The Plan should state clearly that Hong Kong's development must be green, resilient, inclusive, and aligned with ecological limits. It should also identify where Hong Kong's distinctive advantages serve national priorities: finance, standards, professional services, international communication, GBA cooperation, and investable green project pipelines.

2. Provide high level leadership and accountability

Ecological Civilization is cross-cutting. It cannot be delivered by one bureau or department. Climate, biodiversity, buildings, transport, energy, finance, land use, infrastructure, public health, education, and trade are connected.

The first Five-Year Plan should therefore identify how green development priorities will be coordinated across the Chief Secretary's, Financial Secretary's, and relevant policy bureaux' portfolios. It should clarify how public bodies, regulators, statutory authorities, universities, and professional institutions can contribute.

The governance question is not simply "which department is responsible?" It is "who has the authority to align objectives, resolve conflicts, sequence action, and mobilize finance?" Ecological Civilization requires systems leadership.

3. Integration across policy actors and sectors

Integration is essential because Ecological Civilization cannot be advanced through separate sectoral initiatives alone. It requires bureaux, departments, regulators and public bodies to work toward shared outcomes across planning, infrastructure, finance, transport, buildings, biodiversity and innovation. Mainstreaming is the tool through which this integration is achieved: embedding ecological and green development objectives into mandates, plans, investment decisions, procurement, budgeting and day-to-day operations across government.

Hong Kong should treat ecology, climate resilience and natural capital as part of development planning. This is especially important for major spatial and infrastructure priorities, including the Northern Metropolis, coastal resilience, drainage, transport, housing, ports and blue-green infrastructure.

Planning should identify ecological risks, climate vulnerabilities, biodiversity value and natural capital opportunities from the outset. This would help Hong Kong avoid costly retrofits, reduce long-term risk and create better urban environments.

Biodiversity and NbS should be treated as infrastructure. Wetlands, mangroves, forests, urban forests, green corridors, river and stream systems, and coastal habitats can provide flood protection, heat reduction, biodiversity, recreation, education and health benefits. These values need to be reflected in planning, budgeting, procurement and project appraisal.

Public sector assets can also be used more strategically. Government buildings, universities, public housing, transport assets and infrastructure portfolios can become demonstration platforms for retrofits, energy efficiency, resilience, biodiversity and low-carbon procurement. Public leadership can help create markets.

4. Create financeable markets

Hong Kong's strongest contribution may be its ability to make green development investable. Green finance should move beyond bond issuance and ESG disclosure toward real-world transition. This requires project pipelines.

Building retrofits need aggregation mechanisms, energy and emissions performance data, standard contracts, bankable savings models, and trusted verification. NbS need ecological metrics, long-term stewardship models, blended finance structures, and clarity on public and private roles. Green shipping and port transformation and green aviation need infrastructure planning, fuel pathways, insurance, risk-sharing, and cross-border coordination.

Public money should be used strategically to crowd in private capital. Hong Kong should explore guarantees, revolving funds, public-private funds, catalytic grants, green procurement, and outcome-based financing. The goal is not for government to pay for everything. The goal is for government to create conditions under which markets can act.

This is where Hong Kong can connect finance with policy purpose. The city should think of itself not only as a financial centre, but as a market builder.

5. Build transparency, engagement and public understanding

Ecological Civilization will only be credible if it can be measured and understood. Hong Kong can contribute by building trusted systems for data, disclosure, certification, verification, and professional standards. International investors and partners need confidence that green claims are real.

Hong Kong can bridge national Ecological Civilization priorities and global sustainable development expectations through taxonomy alignment, climate disclosure, carbon accounting, biodiversity metrics, transition planning, legal documentation, insurance risk analysis, and independent verification. This is also a way to strengthen Hong Kong's international role. Mainland green projects, GBA ecological initiatives, and Belt and Road development opportunities can be translated into formats that global capital and institutions understand.

Public understanding also matters. Building retrofits require owners, tenants, banks, contractors, and professionals to act. Biodiversity protection requires communities to value nature. Green finance requires confidence. NbS require public acceptance of new ways to plan and manage land and water.

Hong Kong should therefore invest in public education, media engagement, professional training, school and university outreach, and accessible writing. Ecological Civilization should be explained as a practical question: how can Hong Kong develop in a way that is green, resilient, prosperous, and aligned with the country's future?

The first Five-Year Plan should also make Hong Kong's international role explicit. Sustainable development remains the dominant global policy language. Ecological Civilization is China's national development pathway. Hong Kong can connect the two. It can help international audiences understand China's green development direction, help Mainland projects meet international disclosure and financing expectations, develop green finance tools for Belt and Road and Global South cooperation, and convene universities, think tanks, regulators, companies, and civil society to discuss practical application.

This role fits Hong Kong's identity as a super connector, but it must be earned through substance. Credibility will depend on practical models: bankable retrofits, credible transition finance, measurable biodiversity outcomes, green shipping initiatives, nature-based solutions, GBA ecological projects, and trusted standards.

V. Conclusion: Making a Start

Ecological Civilization matters for Hong Kong because it is central to China's national development pathway. It gives sustainable development a stronger strategic frame: one that emphasizes ecological limits, governance, finance, culture, public participation, and long-term development quality.

Hong Kong's first Five-Year Plan is the opportunity to make this frame practical. The city should identify a small number of missions, create the governance conditions to deliver them, and use its strengths in finance, law, standards, professional services, research, and communication to support national green development and GBA cooperation.

This is also the purpose of HKUST's Ecological Civilization project, which runs alongside HKUST's Climate Governance Project. The Ecological Civilization project begins with literature review and policy analysis to understand how the concept developed in China, while the Climate Governance Project provides a practical governance framework, including the 5-Pillar Model, for considering how such concepts can be applied in Hong Kong.

Beyond research, the project aims to popularize the concept through op-eds, media collaboration, social media materials, talks, and public education. Particular attention should be given to schools and universities, where the next generation can be introduced to Ecological Civilization as a way to think about Hong Kong's future.

The immediate task is to make the concept understandable, relevant, and actionable. If Hong Kong succeeds, it can contribute to the country's ecological civilization pathway while strengthening its own role as an international platform for green development, finance, knowledge, and public engagement.

Endnotes

¹ Arthur Hanson, *Ecological Civilization in the People's Republic of China: Values, Action, and Future Needs*, ADB East Asia Working Paper Series No. 21 (Manila: Asian Development Bank, December 2019), 1, <https://doi.org/10.22617/WPS190604-2>.

² Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "Govt aligns with 15th Five-Year Plan," *news.gov.hk*, March 12, 2026, https://www.news.gov.hk/eng/2026/03/20260312/20260312_205436_804.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "Speech by FS at CUHK Business School Greater Bay Area Forum 2026," Press Releases, April 29, 2026, <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202604/29/P2026042900699.htm>.

⁵ Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, "LCQ6: Alignment with Country's Development Plans," Press Releases, January 21, 2026.

⁶ For authoritative Chinese accounts of green development and Ecological Civilization in China, see Xie Zhenhua and Pan Jiahua, *China's Road of Green Development*, trans. Wang Zhiguang, 1st ed. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2018); Pan Jiahua, ed., *Beautiful China: 70 Years Since 1949 and 70 People's Views on Ecological Civilization Construction* (Singapore: Springer, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-6742-5>.

⁷ Hu Jintao, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects," Report to the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 15, 2007.

⁸ The Five-Sphere Integrated Plan is China's overall development layout covering economic, political, cultural, social, and ecological civilization construction. Its adoption at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 elevated Ecological Civilization from an environmental policy concern into one of the five core dimensions of national development. See Hu Jintao, Report to the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, November 8, 2012.

⁹ CPC Central Committee and State Council, *Opinions on Further Promoting the Development of Ecological Civilization* (中共中央、國務院關於加快推進生態文明建設的意見) 2015; CPC Central Committee and State Council, *Integrated Reform Plan for Promoting Ecological Progress* (生態文明體制改革總體方案) 2015.

¹⁰ The 2018 constitutional amendment added "Ecological Civilization" to the Constitution's Preamble, stating that China shall promote coordinated material, political, spiritual, social and ecological advancement, and build China into a "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful socialist country." See *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, as amended March 11, 2018, Preamble.

¹¹ The Ministry of Ecology and Environment was established as part of the 2018 State Council institutional reform. It incorporated the functions of the former Ministry of Environmental Protection and took over responsibilities previously held by other agencies, including climate change and emissions reduction from the National Development and Reform Commission, marine environmental protection from the State Oceanic Administration, water-function-zone management from the Ministry of Water Resources, agricultural non-point-source pollution control from the Ministry of Agriculture, and groundwater pollution prevention from the Ministry of Land and Resources. See State Council of the People's Republic of China, *Plan for Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions* (深化黨和國家機構改革方案) 2018.

¹² Xi Jinping's report to the 20th National Congress states that Chinese modernization is "the modernization of harmony between humanity and nature" and calls for advancing the Beautiful China Initiative and promoting harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. See Xi Jinping, "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity to Build a Modern Socialist Country in All Respects," Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 16, 2022.

¹³ In 2025, the first volume of *Selected Works of Xi Jinping on Ecological Civilization* was published, bringing together his works from December 2012 to April 2025. A separate Q&A-style book on Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization explains the thought through 50 questions. See Xinhua, "Selected Works of Xi Jinping on Ecological Civilization Published," July 2025; Xinhua, "Q&A Book on Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization Published," January 2025.

¹⁴ Christine Loh, *Improving Governance Mechanisms under an Executive-Led System*, paper prepared for the Chief Executive's Policy Unit's Call for Papers to Gather Academic and Policy Insights for Reference Related to Hong Kong's Five-Year Plan, HKUST, April 2026.

¹⁵ Hong Kong Monetary Authority, "HKMA Publishes Hong Kong Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance Phase 2A," Press Releases, January 22, 2026; Hong Kong Monetary Authority, *Hong Kong Taxonomy for Sustainable Finance: Phase 2A*, January 2026.

¹⁶ Liang Dong and Haoning Chen, "China's Path to a Global Ecological Civilization: Concepts and Practices for Sustainable Development," *Chinese Journal of Population, Resources and Environment* 23, no. 3 (September 2025): 295–300, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cjpre.2025.07.001>.

¹⁷ HKUST's Climate Governance Project is a parallel research project examining how Hong Kong can strengthen governance arrangements for climate and sustainability transitions. It develops a 5-Pillar Model of Climate Governance – direction, leadership, integration, finance and market creation, and transparency and engagement – and applies the model to case studies including existing building retrofits, biodiversity/NbS, shipping and port, and green and transition finance.